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Soviet Spy Satellites Scan Mideast

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The Soviet Union has been launching spy satellites in rapid-fire order to keep track of the Arab-Israeli war, a fresh measure of the vital interest the superpowers are taking in the conflict.

The United States also has an eye in the sky—a Samos-type satellite launched by a Titan IIIB-Agena rocket combination on Sept. 27 from Vandenberg Air Base before the October war started in the Mideast. But ground commanders may be able to order the satellite over the battlefield.

In the meantime, the U.S. Air Force is almost certainly taking pictures of the fighting with high-flying spy planes—like the SR-71 which made runs over North Vietnam during the war there despite the Soviet-made SA-2 anti-aircraft missiles on the ground.

But it is the Soviet use of satellites to gather fresh battlefield intelligence that had American space authorities excited yesterday. They noted that such use of the expensive eyes in the sky

means that Russia has given them a tactical role on top of their usual strategic job of counting American missiles.

Russia's Cosmos 596 spy satellite went up on Oct. 3 and was brought down ahead of the usual schedule on Oct. 9. The new Arab-Israeli war broke out on Oct. 6. Ordinarily, such picture-taking satellites stay in space about 12 or 13 days.

Even before Cosmos 596 came down with its 5,000 pounds of cameras and pictures another spy satellite was launched from the Soviet space port of Plesetsk. This second shot, designated Cosmos 597, went up on Oct. 6—the day the Egyptians crossed the Suez Canal. It, too, was brought down early—on Oct. 12.

A third satellite, Cosmos 598, was rocketed into space on Oct. 10. If the Soviets stick to their emergency schedule, Cosmos 598 would be parachuted down by radio command to Russian soil today.

A fourth satellite, Cosmos 599, was launched yesterday from a different Soviet space port—Tyuratam—with the war theater as the probable target for its cameras.

The Voskhod spaceship which has been carrying the film and cameras over the Mideast is big enough to carry two astronauts in spacesuits on civilian missions. Thus, Voskhod in its unmanned spying role is big enough to take lots of combat pictures for Russian leaders. Perhaps pictures of Israeli deployments are going to Arab war leaders as well.

The first two of the

cheaper Voskhod satellites were launched so their cameras could photograph Israeli battlefields around noon when the light was best. The Cosmos 596 flight, according to military officials, carried cameras for photographing broad areas of the Mideast while Cosmos 597 had cameras for zeroing in on specific locations and taking sharp pictures.

On a typical spy mission, Voskhod flies around the globe several times snapping pictures and then makes a "soft" parachute landing near Karaganda—a city about 1,400 miles south-east of Moscow. The spaceship loaded with film sends out radio signals to help guide helicopters to the landing spot.

In contrast to the Soviet satellites which just went up for a few days and then came back down, the United States has been concentrating on reconnaissance space ships which can stay up a long time. But Russia's rapid-fire shots for the October War may cause some reassessment of that trend within American intelligence circles.

The capture of the U. S. Navy spy ship Pueblo off Wonsan, North Korea, in 1963 and the downing of the EC-121 spy plane in 1969, also off North Korea, demonstrated the risk of manned reconnaissance platforms. The United States since then has launched a giant, unmanned spy satellite known as the Lockheed Big Bird. It can stay in space for months at a time gathering a wide array of information about activities on the earth below. But it is a very expensive vehicle.

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